

THE ISSUE OF BHIKSUNI ORDINATION IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION: Frequently Asked Questions & Answers Concerning Bhiksuni (Gelongma) Ordination Information for Nuns, Monks & the General Public

The Issue: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What is bhikṣuṇī ordination?

In order to liberate beings from saṃsāra, the Buddha taught the three higher trainings of morality, meditation, and wisdom. The training in morality is the basis of the Dharma path. It includes rules of ordination for monks and nuns and the precepts they should observe. The Buddha established two levels of ordination for monks and three levels of ordination for nuns. For monks: first śrāmaṇera and then bhikṣu. For nuns: first śrāmaṇerikā, next sikṣamāṇā, and then bhikṣuṇī. In Tibetan language, the levels for monks are translated as getsul and gelong; for nuns they are translated as getsulma, gelobma, and gelongma. Both levels of ordination are available for monks but in the Tibetan tradition, only the first level of ordination is offered for nuns, even though nuns in all other Mahāyāna Buddhist countries can receive all three. Because the Buddha established bhikṣuṇī ordination for women, and his own aunt and stepmother Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī as well as Yaśodharā, the mother of his son Rāhula, were bhikṣuṇīs, we know that he must have considered it to be important.

What is the difference between śrāmaṇerikā and bhikṣuṇī precepts?

Śrāmaṇerikās are novices, beginning their training in morality. They observe 10 precepts which are further divided into 36 precepts. Bhikṣuṇīs are fully ordained female renunciate practitioners. They observe 311, 348, or 364 precepts, depending on the Vinaya tradition of ordination. In the Mahāyāna countries that have bhikṣuṇī ordination, becoming a bhikṣuṇī is a widely accepted part of the preparation for increased study of Buddhist scriptures, meditation, bodhisattva deeds to serve society, and eventually leadership positions.

How can one possibly observe over three hundred precepts?

Observing more vows provides greater opportunities to train in morality, to eliminate defilements, and to create merit. In the Tibetan tradition, each year, hundreds of monks also receive 253 precepts, when they become fully ordained monks. The Buddha, in his wisdom, realized that nuns are also capable of observing all the precepts of full ordination..

One bhikṣuṇī precept states that a bhikṣuṇī must not touch a man. Will this make it difficult for nuns to move about in society?

The precept refers to a bhikṣuṇī with a lustful mind touching a man with a lustful mind. This does not pertain to accidentally touching a man, for example when handing him an object. Observing the precepts increases mindfulness and conscientiousness. Both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs are able to move about and actively contribute to society in many different ways.

Why do bhikṣuṇīs have to observe more precepts than bhikṣus?

There are several reasons. Although the precepts of bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs are not very different in essence, the style of listing them is longer for nuns because a precept stated in many words for monks may be stated as two shorter precepts for nuns. Also there are some additional precepts for nuns that regulate their relationship to monks or deal with matters specific to women. Also, historical research suggests that the Buddha established more than 200 precepts on the basis of misconduct by monks, before the order of nuns was established. When the order of nuns was established, the nuns inherited those precepts from the monks, and another approximately 150 precepts were later added based on the misconduct of nuns. Later, another 50 were added based on misconduct by monks.

What is a śikṣamāṇā?

It is an intermediary level of training during which candidates for bhikṣuṇī ordination train for two years by holding precepts similar to those of śrāmaṇerikās, meanwhile practicing the bhikṣuṇī precepts to be sure that they are well prepared.

How is bhikṣuṇī ordination different than Vajrayāna initiation or Bodhisattva vows?

The purposes of the ceremonies are different. Bhikṣuṇī ordination establishes one as a fully-ordained nun. The Bodhisattva vow establishes a person as a Mahāyāna practitioner working to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Vajrayāna initiation empowers one to engage in the practice of a particular yidam and mantra. An initiation into the Yogatantra and Highest Yogatantra includes the Vajrayāna precepts. They are considered to be the most profound and difficult to keep and therefore require a stable foundation. Keeping the bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī vows is an excellent way to establish this stable foundation.

Is there a difference between taking the precepts of a śrāmaṇerikā and taking the precepts of a bhikṣuṇī? If one's motivation is good, isn't it just as virtuous to be a śrāmaṇerikā as to be a bhikṣuṇī?

The śrāmaṇerikā ordination was prescribed by the Buddha as a preparation and training for becoming a bhikṣuṇī. Of course, whether to take higher ordination is a personal choice. Still, just as keeping the śrāmaṇerikā precepts is regarded as more meritorious than keeping the lay precepts, similarly, keeping the bhikṣuṇī precepts is regarded as more meritorious than keeping the śrāmaṇerikā precepts. For monks, keeping the novice precepts is preparation to later take bhikṣu ordination. Taking bhikṣu ordination and keeping those precepts are considered very meritorious. Keeping the novice precepts is preparation for taking full ordination. Training in the novice precepts prepares one to later take full ordination after a monk or nun becomes 20 years old.

Motivation is always extremely important. A śrāmaṇerikā with right good motivation gains much merit, but with the same right motivation, she will gain even more merit if she becomes ordained as a bhikṣuṇī. If the Buddha had not considered bhikṣuṇī ordination to be important, he would not have established it. Being happy with one's current situation is good, but the Buddha and our lamas always encourage us to strive to improve our Dharma practice.

Why was bhikṣuṇī ordination not previously established in Tibet?

Traditional Tibet is geographically remote, high in the snowy mountains. In the year 767 CE at the invitation of Tibetan King Trisong De'utsen, the great Indian abbot Śāntarakṣita came over the mountains to Tibet and ordained the first seven Tibetan bhikṣus at Samye Monastery. He was followed by many other Indian abbots and many Tibetan men became monks. Eventually a strong lineage of bhikṣus was firmly established in Tibet.

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These Tibetan abbots bestowed śrāmaṇerikā ordination on Tibetan women who sincerely wished to practice the Dharma. However śikṣamāṇā and bhikṣuṇī ordination were rarely performed in Tibet because a properly performed bhikṣuṇī ordination ceremony requires the presence 12 bhikṣuṇīs as well as 10 bhikṣus. Śikṣamāṇās should receive the bhikṣuṇī vows from bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. As far as we know, Indian bhikṣuṇīs never made the difficult journey to Tibet in sufficient numbers to firmly establish a strong lineage of Tibetan bhikṣuṇīs. Bhikṣuṇīs existed in India until the 12th century. After that, both the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī lineages in India were destroyed due to foreign invasions and the decline of Buddhism.

Now that Tibetan Buddhism is no longer isolated and is a full participant in the modern world, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan lineage holders are encouraging the establishment of the bhikṣuṇī lineage for practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. For example, on August 2, 2009, H.H. the Dalai Lama publically stated: “For many years we have been trying to introduce the bhikṣuṇī vow. I often tell Tibetan masters that the restoration of the bhikṣuṇī is actually service to the Buddha Dharma. If the four communities are complete, one can call the respective place a ‘central land’. At present in Tibet the four communities are not complete. Therefore, we are really making every effort to restore the bhikṣuṇī saṅgha.”

Were there bhikṣuṇīs in ancient India?

Yes, the Buddha himself established the bhikṣuṇī ordination for women five years after he had established the bhikṣu order. He stated that women had the potential to attain enlightenment. The Vinaya texts show that many women in the Buddha's own family were famous bhikṣuṇīs. In the 3rd century B.C. the Indian Dharma King Aśoka's daughter Mahāsthavirā Saṅghamitrā (Pāli. Mahātherī Saṅghamittā) who was a bhikṣuṇī went with many other Indian bhikṣuṇīs to Sri Lanka and ordained many Sri Lankan women as śrāmaṇerikā, śikṣamāṇā and bhikṣuṇī. This lineage continued in both India and Sri Lanka for over a thousand years. In the years 433/434 CE, Sri Lankan bhikkhūnīs were invited to China, where together with local bhikṣus, presided by the very learned Indian monk scholar Saṅghavarman, they ordained 300 Chinese nuns as bhikṣuṇīs. From there the bhikṣuṇī lineage spread to many other Mahāyāna countries such as Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam, where it continues today. There are thousands of bhikṣuṇīs in Mahāyāna Buddhist countries.

Is the Chinese bhikṣuṇī ordination lineage an authentic one?

Yes. The Chinese Vinaya lineage is known as the Dharmaguptaka lineage. Chinese historical records such as the Book on the Chinese Dharmaguptaka Bhikṣuṇī Lineage give the biographies of eminent nuns in this lineage generation by generation up to the present day. Among the early Chinese bhikṣuṇīs was Bhikṣuṇī Hui-kuo who in 434 C.E. was ordained in a ceremony which included the Sri Lankan bhikṣuṇīs and Chinese bhikṣus presided by the Indian preceptor Saṅghavarman. A long list of every generation of Chinese bhikṣuṇīs since that date down to the present time is contained in the text Complete Records of the Biographies of Bhikṣuṇīs (Pi-chiu-ni chuan-shu). This book and other biographies show that the bhikṣuṇī lineage was correctly established according to the Vinaya, and the historical records of the preceptor's names demonstrate that the vow has been transmitted in China in an unbroken stream since that time and kept alive each day through the diligent practice of many bhikṣuṇīs. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage is also practiced in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Which Vinaya lineage is practiced in Tibetan Buddhism?

Although historical research suggests that in the Buddha's era there were probably not various Vinaya lineages, over time different lineages developed in different geographical areas and different language groups. Tibetan Buddhists follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage, which has slightly different ceremonies and numbers of precepts than the Dharmaguptaka lineage which is practiced in China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam and the Mahāvihāra lineage which is practiced in Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand.

Why should Tibetan Buddhism revive the bhikṣuṇī lineage after all these centuries?

The most important reason to establish bhikṣuṇī lineage is to carry out the wishes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the heads of all Tibetan traditions that the bhikṣuṇī vow should be revived in the Tibetan tradition. Their intentions in this matter are included in this booklet. As they explain, establishment of the bhikṣuṇī ordination in Tibet will benefit the Dharma because the Buddha stated in the Vinaya that a 'central land' requires the four communities of practitioners; bhikṣu, bhikṣuṇī, upāsaka and upāsikā. Having bhikṣuṇīs will benefit the Tibetan Dharma in these times of degeneration. Also, just as many men who are śrāmaṇeras gain greater merit and deepen their Dharma practice through receiving bhikṣu ordination, women who are śrāmaṇerikās will also be able to gain greater merit and deepen their Dharma practice through becoming bhikṣuṇī.

Just now, isn't it more important to focus on opportunities for better education for nuns than to focus on bhikṣuṇī ordination?

Both are important. Progress can be made in both areas simultaneously. Furthermore monks and nuns are supposed to study the Tripiṭaka, that is Vinaya, Sūtra and Abhidharma. In Tibet and China the entire Vinaya can be studied only, if you are fully ordained. For that reason śrāmaṇeras take the bhikṣu precepts, when they reach the Vinaya class. In Theravāda countries, such as Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, laypeople and novices are encouraged to study the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī precepts, so they can learn how to properly support the saṅgha.

How will becoming a bhikṣuṇī be of benefit to me and others?

There are many reasons why becoming a bhikṣuṇī is a virtuous activity worthy of praise.

- 1) For centuries, many monks who are śrāmaṇeras have made the praiseworthy personal decision to receive bhikṣu precepts in order to gain greater merit, deepen their training in virtuous behavior, and become leaders in the Dharma community. Śrāmaṇeras' reasons for becoming bhikṣus are also the same reasons that śrāmaṇerikās may wish to become bhikṣuṇīs.
- 2) Just as taking refuge marks the difference between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, receiving bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī ordination makes one a true part of the monastic saṅgha. Śrāmaṇera or śrāmaṇerikā ordination is not full entry into the saṅgha, but only a preliminary stage. The actual definition of the four communities of practitioners does not explicitly name śrāmaṇeras or śrāmaṇerikās.
- 3) Those who receive the bhikṣu vows can fully participate in the three principal monastic rites – confession ceremony (sojong), rainy season retreat (yarne), and the ceremony that ends the rainy season retreat (gagyé). This is greatly meritorious.
- 4) Those who are fully ordained have permission to fully study Vinaya texts.
- 5) Nuns who have received bhikṣuṇī vows are more worthy of offering than those who have not. For sponsors, it is more merit to give offerings to nunneries in which there are many bhikṣuṇīs because rituals performed by a bhikṣuṇī saṅgha are said to accumulate the greatest merit and blessing.

How can the lineage of bhikṣuṇī ordination lineage be re-established in the Tibetan tradition?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has strongly supported efforts to revive the bhikṣuṇī vow in the Tibetan tradition since the 1960s and has established committees to research this issue. Scholars in the Department of Religion and Culture as well as heads of the traditions and lamas and abbots of the four schools are studying various methods by which the full ordination for women can be properly conducted. Please support their efforts.

Which methods of ordination are currently under discussion?

To properly conduct a bhikṣuṇī ordination according to the rituals described in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya texts, the ordination ceremony should be performed by a group of 10 bhikṣus, and 12 bhikṣuṇīs. Tibetan Buddhists practice the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya but the only bhikṣuṇīs in the world today practice the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Tibetan scholars are currently discussing three different methods of establishing bhikṣuṇī ordination for Tibetan nuns. Ordination might be performed by:

- 10 Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣus and 12 Dharmaguptaka bhikṣuṇīs, or

- 10 Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣus alone performing a ceremony without bhikṣuṇīs to start the bhikṣuṇī lineage in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, or
- 10 Dharmaguptaka bhikṣus and 10 Dharmaguptaka bhikṣuṇīs.

Although the bhikṣuṇī lineage can increase by all three means, each approach has different pros and cons, which are being discussed by scholars and Vinaya lineage holders.

Will my teachers be upset if I show interest in receiving bhikṣuṇī ordination?

His Holiness Dalai Lama and the lineage holders whose names are in the front of this book, as well as many others, support the establishment of bhikṣuṇī ordination for nuns in the Tibetan tradition. Therefore, when your teachers notice that, they will also not be upset. They will feel happy to know about your interest and aspiration to deepen your Dharma practice.

If there is not yet an organized opportunity for Tibetan nuns to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination, what can I do about this now?

Discuss your interest in becoming a bhikṣuṇī with the leaders of your nunnery, and speak of your interest to any of the heads of the traditions, abbots and leaders who have demonstrated their support by contributing their letters and names in the front of this book. This will encourage their efforts to make this opportunity available by showing them that nuns of the Tibetan tradition desire to obtain this precious opportunity. During the International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Saṅgha in Hamburg (Germany) in 2007 H.H. the Dalai Lama said:

“I am extremely happy to hear from bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs of different Buddhist traditions from around the world all in favor of introducing and establishing bhikṣuṇī ordination. It is really a great encouragement. As I mentioned this morning, this has been a serious concern of mine since the 1960s, and such a meeting as this I have dreamed of and encouraged for a long time, but it has not materialized until today. I just want to make clear that we all accept and recognize as bhikṣuṇīs those Tibetans and Westerners who have received Dharmaguptaka bhikṣuṇī ordination.”

How would having bhikṣuṇīs change the day-to-day life of the saṅgha in the Tibetan community?

Most saṅgha functions and activities would continue as they are done at present. The nuns greatly value and appreciate the monks who teach them the Dharma, and that would continue. Bhikṣuṇīs would do sojong (poṣadha) by themselves, and further bhikṣuṇī ordinations would be done by a dual saṅgha of bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs. The nuns will continue to work together with the monks for the betterment of the Tibetan community and the flourishing of the Dharma in India, Tibet, and abroad.

How can I support the efforts of His Holiness Dalai Lama and other heads of the traditions to re-establish the opportunity for bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Tibetan tradition?

Talk to your family, and friends, especially those who are members of the saṅgha. Encourage them to support His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the other heads of the traditions in helping Tibetan Buddhism join other Mahāyāna

countries in bringing the Buddha's tradition of bhikṣuṇī vows into the Tibetan tradition. Share this booklet with your friends.

Why should I care about this if I am not a nun?

There are many reasons everyone should care about this.

- As Mahāyāna Buddhists, we wish for the happiness and spiritual development of all sentient beings. By becoming bhikṣuṇī and keeping the precepts, women will create more merit and purify themselves, thus advancing the own Dharma practice, and also strengthen the Tibetan tradition of Dharma in general because Tibet will now possess a complete four-fold Saṅgha and be considered a truly “central land”.
- As members of the Tibetan saṅgha, it is our duty to help the efforts of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other heads of the traditions to continue to uphold and spread the precious teachings of the Buddha.
- Tibetan society both in Tibet and in exile will benefit from having well-educated bhikṣuṇīs who can provide a good example in the community. This will strengthen lay people's faith and encourage them to give more support to both monasteries and nunneries.
- Well-educated bhikṣuṇīs can help to educate children in the Dharma, teaching at Tibetan schools, and doing after school Dharma classes. The more children who know about the Dharma, the more will want to become monks and nuns in the future.
- Nowadays in countries such as Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam and Sri Lanka bhikṣuṇīs are a strong support in social work and counseling. The worldwide largest Buddhist charity was founded by a bhikṣuṇī and is lead by her. In 2009 her organisation raised 343 million US\$. In 1966 when she and five others began, they were sewing baby shoes to raise money for the poor.
- You may be reborn in a future life as a woman, and if you become a nun, you will be happy to have the opportunity for full ordination available for you.